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AUTHOR Monroe, Eula Ewing
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ABSTRACT

The literature of recent years reveals a surge in efforts to upgrade inservice programs. Basic to the more promising practices has been the recognition that staff development activities based on identified needs are much more likely to be effective than are prepackaged presentations aimed toward a general audience. The few studies analyzing the perceived needs of teachers have revealed that the greatest problems reading teachers face and want addressed are diagnosing and treating remedial reading difficulties and meeting the individual needs of students. The following guidelines have been gleaned from literature on preparing and conducting reading inservice programs: (1) conduct sessions during released time; (2) make teachers active participants when planning inservice programs; (3) use case studies and audiovisual aids during presentations; (4) stress diagnosis and correction of reading difficulties; (5) show how the presentations relate to meeting students' individual needs; (6) make the sessions activity-oriented; (7) make the instruction specific; (8) present effective models of what is being taught; (9) provide effective means of feedback; (10) instill within the participants a personal commitment to implement the new knowledge; and (11) allow for individuality and different personalities when working with teachers. (RL)

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INSERVICE READING EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

Eula Ewing Monroe

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, KY 42101

(502) 745-2157

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INSERVICE READING EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

Problems Related to Inservice Education

Inservice education has long been a part of the American educational scene. Its purposes have been defined variously according to the role of education in the social, cultural, and political milieu of the times (Nicholson, Joyce, Parker, & Waterman, 1976; Richey, 1957). Inservice education has been viewed by many educators as "a necessary stepchild" (National School Public Relations Association, 1975, p. 5) of the educational process; inservice programs have in many instances been labeled as "unsystematic, poorly focused, and largely ineffectual" (Otto & Erickson, 1973, p. vii). Otto and Erickson phrase the criticisms in this manner:

> Let's face it. While most teachers would agree that inservice education is needed, they would also agree that their inservice experiences have been poor. The reason inservice tends to be dull or useless is that often the sessions are poorly timed, too general, or too specifically devoted to administrative housekeeping. (p. 8)

Fitzgerald and Marino (1978) summarized their views of the inadequacies of inservice education in the following statement:

> The history of staff development represents the soap opera of education. It is continuously produced, usually with high drama, and invariably seeks to resolve problems in a short time span. Unlike soap operas, however, staff development involves real people. (p. 49)

In 1969, Harris and Bessent reported that there was a dearth of empirical evidence regarding the quality of inservice programs.

They observed from the literature and from experience, however, the following as areas in which the most serious mistakes occurred when planning and implementing inservice education:

1. Failure to relate in-service program plans to genuine needs of staff participants.
2. Failure to select appropriate activities for implementing program plans.
3. Failure to implement in-service program activities with sufficient staff and other resources to assure effectiveness. (p. 4)

Unfortunately, their observations regarding inservice education remain true in far too many instances today. Many of the problems related to the quality of inservice education can be traced to the absence of a meaningful conceptual framework for guiding in-service activities and to a history of inadequate budgetary support (Otto & Erickson, 1973). A major source of the criticisms which many programs have encountered, however, is the determination of inservice needs by personnel other than the teachers themselves (NSPRA, 1975; Smith, Otto, & Hansen, 1978).

Although inservice education has been subjected to major criticisms, it is not in a hopeless state. The literature of recent years reveals a surge in efforts to upgrade inservice programs (Nicholson et al., 1976). Basic to the more promising practices has been the recognition that staff development activities based on identified needs are much more likely to be effective than are pre-packaged presentations aimed toward a general audience. Current views support two major premises: Inservice education is a necessary, growing institution, "a potentially strong design in the fabric of American teacher education" (Brush, 1976, p. 1972A); and

in order to have effective inservice programs, the needs identified by teachers themselves must be addressed (Ingersoll, 1976).

Teacher Needs in Reading Education

The problems and concerns which have characterized inservice education in general have been voiced for many years in regard to inservice activities in reading education (Otto & Erickson, 1973). While the literature relates numerous articles and published descriptions of inservice programs in reading, few empirical studies on the topic apparently have been conducted (Bush & Enemark, 1975).

Emerging from a landmark nationwide study of reading education by Austin and Morrison (1963) was the recommendation that inservice programs be based on the needs of participants. Prominent among the few studies analyzing the perceived needs of teachers which were located through the literature search are surveys conducted by Adams (1964) and Smith, Otto, and Harty (1970). These investigators assessed the needs of teachers to determine areas for emphasis in inservice activities relating to reading education.

Adams analyzed teacher responses to a questionnaire designed to determine teachers' instructional needs in reading. Two hundred sixty-eight teachers from 52 randomly selected public elementary schools in Florida were respondents. The study revealed a need for greater understanding in 28 areas of reading instruction, with the greatest needs being: (a) diagnosis and treatment of remedial reading problems, and (b) meeting the individual needs of students.

The results of the study by Adams provided a means for selecting topics for inservice meetings; however, the responses of

teachers from all six grades were grouped together for data analysis. The results did not provide information which would aid in planning for specific subgroups, i.e., primary teachers and intermediate teachers (Moburg, 1972).

Smith, Otto, and Harty (1970) surveyed 225 elementary teachers in an attempt to develop guidelines for improving reading instruction. They categorized responses to their questionnaire on the basis of each respondent's present teaching level (primary or intermediate) and years of teaching experience. Teachers at both the primary and intermediate levels expressed greatest need for more information about providing for the disabled reader, diagnosing individual needs of students, and using different methods for teaching reading. These findings were in general agreement with the results reported by Adams (1964).

The respondents in the study by Smith et al. (1970) indicated a need for more information about 12 specific areas of reading instruction. Also needed were inservice programs for teachers at different grade levels and with varying terms of experience.

The specific lists of needs generated by the studies by Adams (1964) and Smith et al. (1970) and the findings of other researchers (Dillner, 1976; Hebert, 1973; Logan & Erickson, 1979; Rutherford & Weaver, 1974; Smith & Barrett, 1974) may be of some assistance in providing direction for inservice programs. Those responsible for planning for inservice development should be cognizant, however, that specific needs of teachers are likely to vary from region to region, from school to school, and from individual to individual (Hebert, 1973; Johnston, 1977; NSPRA, 1975; Smith, Otto, & Hansen, 1978).

The Current Focus

During the last decade, sweeping criticisms have been directed toward the American educational system. Various movements--e.g., accountability, back to basics, mainstreaming, competency-based education, minimum competency testing--have had an impact upon preservice teacher preparation programs and have placed additional requirements upon classroom teachers.

Various factors--e.g., decreasing enrollment, the general oversupply of teachers, and the recognized need and increased incentives for teachers to continue their professional growth--have led teacher education institutions to emphasize the development of inservice programs (Edelfelt, 1974; Kuchinskas, 1976; Zirkel & Albert, 1979). Although inservice education currently is receiving increased attention from teacher educators and professionals in the field (Fitzgerald & Marino, 1978), it continues to be denounced with the frequent charge of unresponsiveness to teacher needs (Harris & Bessent, 1969; Johnston, 1977; Zigarmi, Betz, & Jensen, 1977).

The problems which characterize inservice education in general have been voiced in regard to inservice activities in reading education (DeCarlo & Cleland, 1968; Otto & Erickson, 1973). A major concern continues to be the determination of content by personnel other than teachers themselves (Allen & Chester, 1978; Edelfelt & Lawrence, 1975; Harris, 1973; Iverson, 1974).

The central guiding principle gleaned from the literature regarding inservice reading education is that inservice activities should be based on the expressed needs of teachers. Once their

needs have been adequately identified, the following points extracted from the literature by Smith (1976) may be of assistance in preparing for and conducting reading inservice sessions:

1. The sessions should be conducted during released time from normal teaching responsibilities for the participants.
2. Participants should be actively involved in the planning of the inservice program.
3. Case studies and audio-visual aids should be used during the presentations.
4. The sessions should stress diagnosis and correction of reading difficulties.
5. The sessions should relate the material presented to methods for meeting individual differences.
6. The sessions should be activity oriented.
7. The instruction should be specific.
8. Effective models of what is being taught should be presented.
9. Provision should be made for effective feedback.
10. The sessions should be conducted in such a way as to build and instill within the participants a personal commitment to what they are learning and a commitment to implement their new knowledge.
11. The individuality of the teachers should be planned for.
12. When working with teachers, their different personalities should be taken into consideration. (pp. 5-6)

With declining student enrollments and increased budgetary concerns, many school systems are finding that inservice education offers the only readily accessible means for helping teachers to improve their skills. It is generally accepted, however, that inservice education is viewed less than favorably by many of the participants. Adopting the central guiding principle of basing inservice activities on the expressed needs of the participants and beginning to modify planning based on the above suggestions should assist school systems in bringing about needed changes in reading instruction.

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